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Stillness

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Stillness

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Report

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Abstract

Stillness

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In this paper, the imagery of public exhibition spaces, museums, and public collections is discussed in relationship to my body of work. I engage ideas of stillness, the creation of alternate realities, and how preconceptions shape interpretation. My interest in stillness and the activation of captured moments is expressed through the relationship between Cabela's and my photographic archive. By compositing and reconstructing these images, I shift the viewer's perception of reality. I thus explore how these aesthetic considerations generate fictitious interpretations. Dependent upon the viewer, my drawings transform the reality of the photographic so that we are confronted by the nature of our preconceptions.

Table of Contents

List of Figures	vi
TEXT	1
Bibliography	26

List of Figures

Figure 1: Protected	9
Figure 2: Complex	10
Figure 3: Mountain II	11
Figure 4: Mountain III	12
Figure 5: Cabela's	13
Figure 6: The White City	14
Figure 7: Apocryphal 1	15
Figure 8: Apocryphal 2	16
Figure 9: Apocryphal 3	17
Figure 10: Apocryphal 4	18
Figure 11: Apocryphal 5	19
Figure 12: Apocryphal 6	20
Figure 13: Apocryphal 7	21
Figure 14: Mountain I	22
Figure 15: Jonas Studio	23
Figure 16: Aquatics I	24
Figure 17: Aquatics II	25

As a medium, drawing offers many freedoms: the manipulation of light and space; the ability to capture the stillness of an image; and the potential to transform its meaning. Drawing simultaneously controls, restricts, and enables expression. A single moment may be rendered still, allowing it to be relived at will. I use drawing to engage ideas of stillness, to create alternate realities, and to question the nature of our preconceptions.

My drawings concentrate on source images from a variety of public exhibition spaces: expositions, museums, and public collections. On the surface, they profess to be windows into worlds of exotic things and ancient histories, but underneath they reflect immense power, wealth, and privilege. In previous work, I focused on types of open-air museums used to confine, restrict, and protect nature.

Protected (fig. 1) and *Complex* (fig. 2), describe the conflict between the openness of landscape, and the inherently static structure of the museum apparatus. Both images examine the destruction that takes place in the name of preserving memory, moment, and the monument. While this apparatus aims to preserve a fixed point in time, the natural world continues to slowly change. The effort to cage, permanently exhibit, or otherwise control landscape is rendered a futile act. The intent of the museum structure becomes clear in these drawings: to capture a moment in time and preserve it unchanged.

My most recent work examines commercial spaces that create highly manufactured versions of nature for the public. The self-proclaimed “museum” and retail space, *Cabela’s*, is an exhibit created to view trophies. These displays reveal the human impulse to possess and collect unique souvenirs. They are fascinating to me because they

are used both to represent an animal in its prime, and to celebrate its capture. Visitors to *Cabela's* engage with the diorama as a single scene activated by many animals, in a large landscape contained in architecture. To me, the power of this scene relies on a moment made still that is to be relived on command.

In *Cabela's*, a community of individuals comfortably view a displaced landscape filled with taxidermy; it serves as a window into a live, exotic, and hidden world. In my role as a viewer, I take part simply because it is offered to me — to visually consume. In part, I enjoy looking at this spectacle, but I also feel aversion towards it. Although I believe I think differently about these spaces than many of *Cabela's* patrons, I find myself attracted to the stillness of such scenes.

In my drawings, I reanimate *Cabela's* exhibitions as living dioramas in an imagined or imposed literary present. In the works, *Mountain II and Mountain III*, the animals are not works of taxidermy, but a live menagerie of wildlife enclosed within a mystifying architectural confinement (see fig. 3 and 4). This is how I imagine them functioning for many visitors to this space. For me, this is only possible through the enabling process of drawing — animating these creatures within in an absurd context.

The diptych, *Cabela's and the White City*, depicts two entirely constructed interior spaces that include built “natural” formations (see fig. 5 and 6). Taking cues from both architecture and history, one space pre-dates the other, yet both are similar in composition and structure. In *The White City*, the viewer sees an immense mountain of vegetation, and in *Cabela's*, a future variation of this form overpopulated with fauna.

Cabela's and the White City superficially creates an allusion to charming scenes of wildlife. I hope that when the context of these drawings is understood, however, these superficial narratives turn the critical viewer towards an even stranger reality. Once again, the drawings render a moment made still. In this way, they function as an allegory for stillness.

My interest in stillness and the activation of captured moments led me to research the relationship between Cabela's and the photographic image. Through photography, I documented five of Cabela's stores throughout the Midwest. By compositing and reconstructing these images, I shift emphasis from the animals to the mountains and surrounding architecture. In the seventeen small works entitled, *Apocryphal* (fig. 7-13), the stillness of the animals allows me to explore a constructed reality through drawing. In this way, retail spaces and dioramas are ultimately transformed into living landscapes.

Through the drawing process, I transform the original photographic source and the meaning it has for me. Through repetition of form, sense of scale, and light, a still moment becomes "active," transforming the sense of both time and place. Siegfried Kracauer (1927), in discussing some of the first theories of film, states, "We are contained in nothing and photography assembles fragments around a nothing" (431).

Seven decades later, David Deutsch (1999) echoes this sentiment: "The photographs inform my painting because their virtual nothingness makes the paint more important to me" (Gardener, 110). Deutsch uses surveillance-style photography to inform the space and feeling of his paintings, and this also informs his use of the medium (Deutsch, 68). Similarly, I create and use a photographic archive of images to understand

how drawing references space, and how the archive itself gathers meaningful fragments for the creation of my work. I gather many similar moments and distill their collective meaning.

I construct alternative realities from a static source through my process of image making. In my drawing, I create an immediate reference to the structure of an environment, bringing the viewer into the imagined world. It is not a historical record or account because my interpretation is always present in these drawings. I choose to accentuate the constructed, artificial nature of these spaces to reveal a specific moment in time or memory.

My aesthetic considerations also generate fictitious realities. I use a restricted palette to remove the banal reality of my primary sources. The removal of color changes the dynamic between the subjects (taxidermy) and the landscape. As the colors from the original photographs are removed, part of the artificiality of the scene is also removed. The landscape becomes more mystifying, as an alien scene whose aesthetic sensibilities are known only unto itself.

The large and small works function differently. They do this first in terms of their breadth and finish, and second in levels of clarity. In part, this is due to an alteration in process and construction methods from the previous smaller drawings to accommodate the larger works' need for greater depth and value.

To create a deeper blackness in the drawings, I changed the formulation for the black ground. By creating a greater range of values, I am better able to investigate new modes in the operation of light. I develop two structures of light on the foundation of this

black ground: one that is used to make forms visible by reflection, and the other, an independent light from an invented source. This type of light is used to create dramatic effects, to draw the gaze, and to add emphasis in certain areas.

The transformation to drawing from the photographic image allows the subject to look alive against a re-imagined backdrop. Roland Barthes describes this phenomenon as “a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live,” and this is a concept he also uses in reference to time (Green, 14). While photography attests that the “object” has been real, a moment in the past, and (sometimes) dead, my drawings do not have this preconception. Through drawing I can renegotiate the viewer’s relationship to time, the live, the real, and imagined, by creating and directing ambiguity (Green, 15).

In my work, the archive is used to create an important entry point to a specific moment when an image seems familiar, but is difficult to contextualize. For example, the drawing *Mountain I* (fig. 14) manipulates the relationship between subject and environment. In this drawing, the retail space appears to encroach upon the landscape. In other pieces, such as *Mountain III*, (fig. 4) the landscape appears to be a natural incursion into a man-made, architectural enclosure.

I am guided by the power of stillness to reconfigure many versions of similar moments. As I choose images from my archive, the specificity of moment fades and the collective image becomes an archetype, forming one idealized version. The historical references in my work act as an appropriated foundation that permits the intersection between cultural memory and my new interpretation of place. These degrees of freedom permit the viewer to interpret my drawings through a new, perceived, or imagined reality.

The appropriation of a shared understanding of “the real” (or historical account) tethers the viewer’s imagination to a reality often stranger than fiction, while at the same time, putting another fiction in its place.

The bears, in the piece *Jonas Studio*, seem to be growling at each other. In the context of its title, however, it becomes apparent that the subjects are not alive (see fig. 15). In this way, the drawing creates, as Kracauer might say, an ambiguity between the “live” and the “real”. Once the viewer knows the context of the piece, the subjects become things desirable only to collect. They are artifacts created for display, to be preserved forever.

Like Deutsch, I rely on photography as a catalyst to inform my use of paint and other materials. I use a photographic image to initiate my drawings, and imbue them with a very different meaning. The source images are too literal, with no room for the suspension of disbelief. Drawing becomes a way to create room for interpretation, and allow greater complexity of meaning. As the viewer interprets the intention of the invented space, he or she is confronted by the nature of one’s preconceptions.

In the Film Noir genre, a seductive aesthetic is used to modify the viewer’s gaze, usually to describe a struggle in a moral or ethical conflict. It makes the sinister, or the ugly more palatable. In the drawings, *Aquatics I and II* (see fig. 16 and 17), the subjects appear to either be briefly captured in motion, or dynamic works of taxidermy. The use of light is similar to Film Noir, and also more generally references the cinematic. They recall film stills that capture actions, briefly paused. Both freeze a moment from the past and bring it into a present to be revisited whenever we wish.

Three artists who have influenced both ideas of memory and sense of place in my work are Tacita Dean, James Castle, and Hurvin Anderson. In Tacita Dean's drawings, she isolates and gives emphasis to forms by directly painting on photographs. These images range from large trees to epic renderings of disasters. Her sense of the cinematic resonates in these still images. Her specific use of materials (black board drawings with chalk, large format black and white photography of landscapes, and celluloid film) often reference decay, beauty and memory.

In the strange interiors of James Castle, commonplace scenes are made alien to the viewer as he abstracts the everyday objects of his experience. These drawings create a sense of familiarity and evoke memory. The drawings of Hurvin Anderson also influence my ideas of abstraction and fractured space in landscape. The drawings create a sense of light, very formally at times, through patterned use of values and forms.

In rendering the atmosphere of a space, I envision its darkness; it is an active process. As I proceed, I make decisions about the feeling conveyed by light, choosing what feels natural and what feels apart from nature. I create a dream-like effect when light seems to be operating outside of a normal sense of space. As stated earlier, I use a restricted palette to create extreme contrast and exclude color. This further removes my drawing from its original source.

My drawings are a transformative act. They are an apparatus for preserving fixed points in time, yet they are reflective of the constant state of flux in the natural world. At the same time, as an allegory for stillness, they are dependent upon the viewer, relying on one's ability to relive memories at will. Through drawing, I transform the photographic-

still in this way — meaning is interpreted again and again, as we are confronted by the nature of our preconceptions.

Figure 1

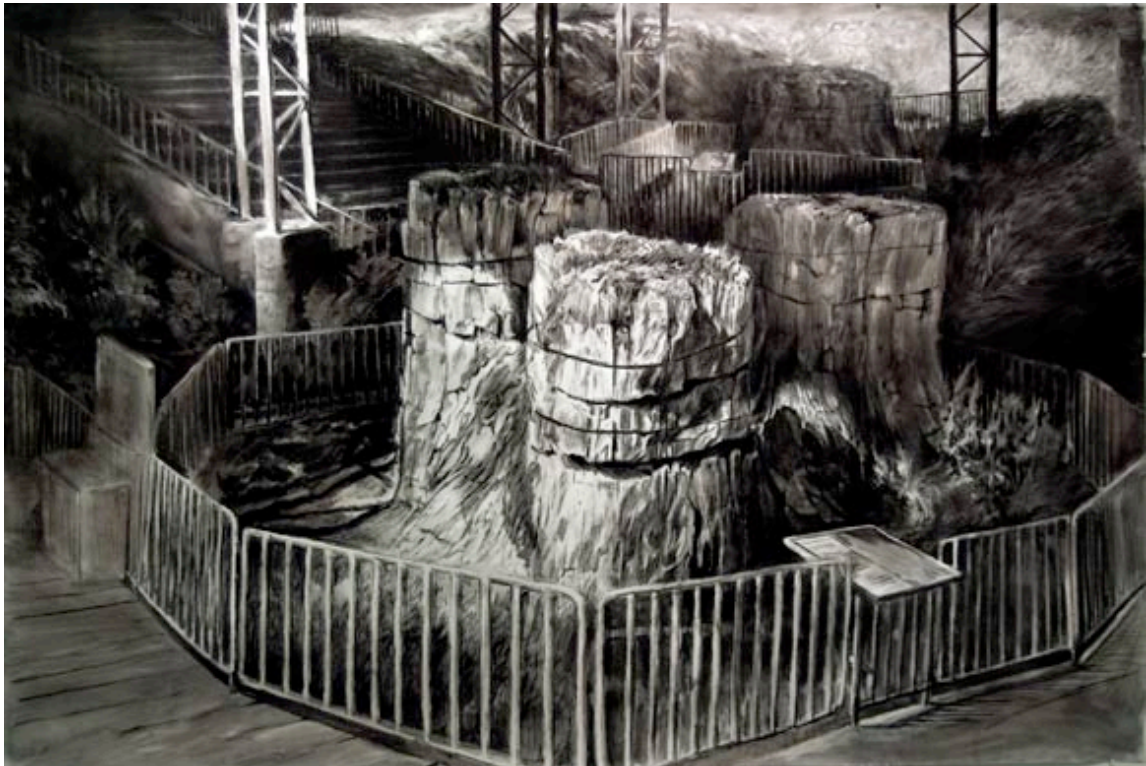


Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

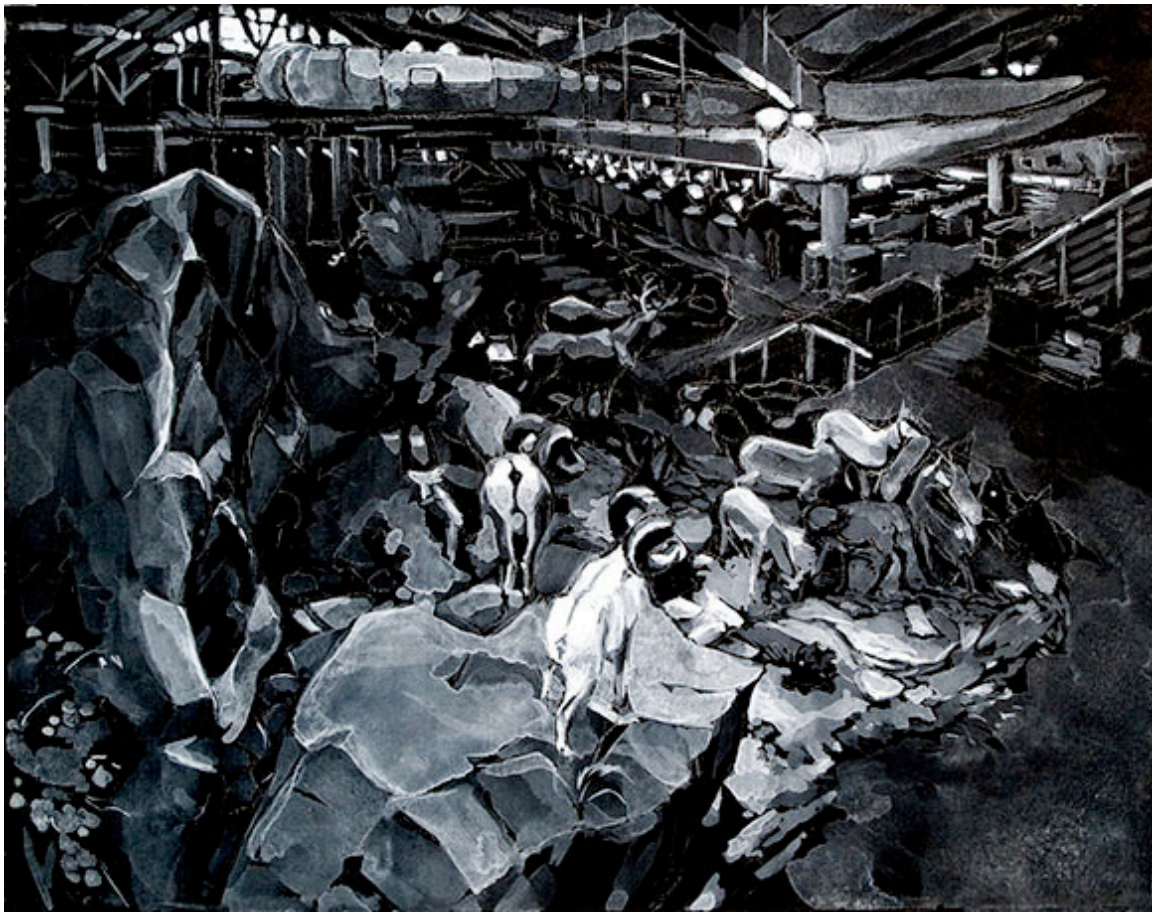


Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



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